

Thackeray's handling of Becky Sharp, full of  
 little slaps of  
 disapproval and pinches of virtuous sarcasm;  
 in spite of  
 which she remains so much more human and  
 tolerable  
 than his virtuous offspring. And it is not only  
 in fiction  
 that we still have something to learn in this  
 matter of  
 moral sang-froid; biography and  
 autobiography, criticism  
 and the essay, suffer also with us from our  
 want of it. In  
 biography, whether it is A. C. Benson  
 condemning Ros\*  
 setti for living with too little 'decorum\*', or  
 some modern  
 writer condemning Matthew Arnold for  
 living with too  
 much, the same itch for sitting in moral  
 judgement is the  
 besetting malady. To argue that because a  
 man did  
 something he was subsequently unhappy, or  
 that if he  
 had done something else he might have  
 been happier,  
 may be reasonable and interesting; to  
 condemn him by  
 rigid moral formulae that the next generation  
 or the next  
 reader may not accept is merely stupid. It is  
 the same with  
 a great deal of English criticism; even today it  
 is only too  
 easy to open a work, say, on Shakespeare, by  
 some writer  
 with an established name (the two instances  
 that follow  
 shall remain charitably nameless), and read  
 that 'morally  
 Antony has not a leg to stand on', or that  
 'really\* Cleo-  
 patra is 'vulgar . . . , preposterous, superficial,  
 cruel, and  
 greedy, of the flesh fleshy, with intelligence  
 only enough  
 ... to practise the arts of a low-born trollop'.  
 What is a

moral leg? What do such emotional noises  
add to our  
understanding? Even Coleridge and Arnold,  
with all  
their superiority, fall into the same pit;  
especially the latter  
with his dismissal of *Faust* as a 'seduction-  
drama' and his  
lamentations over Heine as  
\*disrespectable~and not even  
the merit of not being a Philistine can make  
up for a  
man's being that'. Imagine finding such a  
sentence in  
Sainte-Beuve! No doubt, in criticism, such  
utterances of  
private opinion are less ridiculous than in  
history or